

Is African environmental ethics anthropocentric?

Chinedu S. Ifeakor

Abstract

This paper questions the anthropocentric interpretation of African Environmental Ethics. For an ethics to be truly African, it has to be grounded in African ontology and worldview. It looks at anthropocentrism from a historical and obligatory perspective. Two important values can be inferred from African ontology which can help in proffering a truly African environmental ethics are; the place of Humans in the ecosystem and the interrelatedness of being. I argue here that although humans have a place in African ontology, it does not translate as anthropocentrism, as humans are only a part of an interconnected whole of being. I call this obligatory anthropoholism. With the philosophical method of analysis, it will be seen that humans, anthropos, have a privileged part in the whole of ecosystem- holism- and this part is not right based but obligatory based. To care, tend and preserve nature for the balance of ecosystem and for its intrinsic worth. This forms the burden of this paper.

Introduction

Scholars have often branded African environmental ethics as chiefly anthropocentric i.e. human centered and therefore inadequate. The burden of this paper therefore, is to revisit the question of the anthropocentricity of African environmental ethics with the aim of debunking such claims based on African ontology. The researcher here argues that though ‘humans’ have a

part to play, ‘anthropos,’ the centrism in ‘anthropocentrism’ is not African. There could be other perspectives but not this one. To address this, we work with the following outline

- The nature of African Environmental ethics.
- Anthropocentrism in African environmental ethics
- Anthropocentrism: Historical and Obligatory perspective.
- The ‘Human’ {Anthropos} in African Environmental Ethics.
- Evaluation and Conclusion

The nature of African environmental ethics

Should humans care for their environment? Why should it be humans who should care about their environment? Why should they care after all? Are there values and perspectives that can be deduced or borrowed from other cultures of the world to improve and enrich world consciousness as to how and why humans should preserve their environment? These questions bother environmental ethicists. They may not simply answer them straight away but can give perspectives to the questions and attempt in their various little ways to answer it, and even if they fail, depending on what failure in this context means, at least like Popper will say, they are closer to the truth.

Environmental ethics is based on the idea that morality ought to be extended to include the relationship between humans and nature. Although the field has its roots in the early writings of John Muir, Albert Schweitzer and Aldo Leopold, according to Callicott, environmental ethics only began to gain support in the 1960s with the growing popularity of the environmental movement. The journal of Environmental Ethics was founded in

1979 and is devoted entirely to the topic. There are a number of different ways to understand an extension of moral consideration to nature. For example, is the extension individualistic or holistic? In other words, are individual plants and animals given moral consideration or is morality only extended to whole species or ecosystem? Another important distinction is whether the extension is rights based or responsibility based; in other words, does nature has the right to be protected or do humans simply has the responsibility to protect nature? The third one is whether the moral extension is anthropocentric or ecocentric because this determines what the focus of the environmental ethics should be—humans or nature.

African environmental ethics therefore, according to Ekwealor, is an applied philosophy dealing with the fundamental principles that govern the relationship between man and the environment based on the African worldview.² African ontology has a part to play in this, as it reflects on the various ways Africans conceptualize the relationship between humans and nature. Ekwealor also posited that Africans believe that the natural environment and man are composed of invisible energies and their relationships result to one form of manifestation or the other; in other words, unlike the West where there is discord and separation from nature, African environmental philosophy or ethics has a background belief in the linkage of nature, community and man, from which an ethical relationship is defined.

Anthropocentrism in African environmental ethics

Anthropocentrism is the human centered approach to environmental concerns. It tries to care for the environment

because of its benefits to man. Man is the reason why the environment should be catered for. The Ozone layer depletion, Global warming food shortages aesthetic beauty, species lost, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis all are a result of environmental changes and they affect humans chiefly and therefore the anthropocentric environmental attitude is that the need to preserve the environment is chiefly for the sake of man who lives in it.

The term ‘anthropocentrism’, according to Campbell, was first coined in the 1960s amidst the controversy over Darwinian theory of evolutions to represent the idea that humans are the center of the universe. Anthropocentrism considered humans to be the most important life forms and other forms of life to be important only to the extent that they affect humans or can be useful to human. In an anthropocentric ethics, nature has moral consideration because degrading or preserving nature can in turn harm or benefit humans. For example using this ethics, it would be considered wrong to cut down the rainforests because they contain potential cures for human disease.

This (anthropocentrism) is against the term ‘ecocentrism’ which comes from the term first coined ‘biocentric’ in 1913 by an American biochemist, Lawrence Henderson to represent the idea that the universe is the originator of life.⁴ This term was adopted by the so-called deep ecologist in the 1970s to refer to the idea that all life has intrinsic value. In an ecocentric ethics, Campbell posits, nature has moral consideration because it has intrinsic value, value aside from its usefulness to human. Using this ethic, for example, one could judge that it would be wrong to cut down the rainforest because would cause the extinction of many plant and animal species.

Scholars on African environmental ethics

Too many scholars have summarized the environmental attitude of the Africans to be anthropocentric. For Callicot (2001),

Apparently, therefore Africa looms as a big spot on the world map of indigenous environmental ethics for a very good reason African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interest. Hence one might expect to distil from it no more than a weak and indirect environmental ethic. Similar to (a) type of ecologically enlightened utilitarianism, focused on long – range human welfare. Or perhaps one could develop a distinctly African stewardship environmental ethic grounded in African Montheism.

Some prominent scholars from Africa are quite explicit in holding anthropocentrism. Benezet Bugo, a respected authority on the theology of Central African people argues that human life is the fundamental concern of African ethics. Similarly, Godfrey Onah, A Nigeria catholic theologian and philosopher, locate human life at the centre of morality in African traditional religion and philosophy. He does claim that everything in the natural world has a spiritual nature of some sort, including humans, plants and animals but human life is more highly valued than that of other living things.⁸

It seems true to say that many Western scholars as well as African scholars consent to the anthropocentricity of African

environmental ethic and this seems incontestable if looked at from the perspective of African ontology. Africans believe in the hierarchy of beings according to Mbiti. But a more recent articulation of this hierarchical argument is found in South African Philosopher, Augustine Shutte's book. Apart from a permanent caused relationship between God and the universe, he identifies 'two other features' of the traditional view of the universe namely its hierarchical structure and the fact that it is centered on humanity.

The hierarchy of the universe is a hierarchy of strength or power. God is at the top inanimate things at the bottom, with humanity in the middle... in this universe, humanity occupies the central place and this is true not in the sense that we occupy the middle tier of the hierarchy of life or vital force, but also in the most important players in this drama "Humanity" what the world is all about. We are the whole point of the plot, and even God plays a part that is ancillary to our own. The earth is our home so God would like to make it his home too. But whether he can or not depends on us. He may be the author of the play, but it is a play about humanity. If he wants a part in it he must be obedient to the plot.

For Odour, it is a fact that some forms of existence have some forms of advantage over others,

for example in the African jungle the lions has an advantage over the gazelle – an advantage which suggests that the lion is higher on the ontological hierarchy than the gazelle. Similar hierarchies of advantage are to be seen even in a pack of lions, where

there is a clear chain of command therefore, if I was to find the idea of hierarchy to be eventually morally problematic, I would have to assert also that the very structure of the universe is morally problematic.

Another way of understanding the hierarchy of beings would be to see it as involving three worlds. The spiritual world consists first and foremost of the Great Spirit, God, but also include family ancestral spirit and chiefs; territorial ancestral spirits. Which is why they are commonly associated with traditional African ecological religious beliefs. The human world according to Taringa, consists of the living the living dead, and those who are yet to be born. In fact living human beings have strict duties of obedience both to the dead and to the yet to be born. This is illustrated by the popular Kenyan proverb, ‘the world was not given to you by your parents – was lent to you by our children’. It appears, then that ancestors straddle the spiritual and the human worlds. God communicate with living human beings through the ancestors. Within the realm of living human beings the elders occupy a high position than youths. Old age authority and the elders occupy a higher position than youths. Old age, authority and the spiritual one regarded as sacred. The older use their experience to transmit moral wisdom to the young through tales and proverbs. the young have strict duties of obedience to the elders, duties of respect and duties to listen to the wisdom disseminated which becomes the common moral position of those living finite lives.¹² Finally, the natural world consists of animals, plants and all biological life. Animals are mostly personified in the principle of totem-animals. This is a religious

idea around which many if not most traditional African comities) understand their relationship to each other and the rest of world.

Ogunbemi acknowledges that the African ethic of care is different from the feminist ethics of care in that it is essentially human –centered. Humans are taken necessarily to rely on the non-human world for survival. In essence it is precisely for the sake of present and future human wellbeing that we must treat the natural world in which we live with respect. It therefore seems plausible to say that African environmental ethic is basically human –centered.

Scholars have tried to show that African environmental ethic is not just human–centered but much more than that- a somewhat holistic stewardship ethics. To them, it will be reductionist perspective to limit African attitude to the environment just to be for human benefits only. As Mbiti’s Bantu philosophy acknowledges, man has a central place in the hierarchy of beings but yet not the head of that hierarchy; there is a being higher than him/her and laws higher than his/hers which he/she must necessarily obey and disobedience to these laws brings about calamities. Thus man is not completely in charge; rather just a part of the whole being.¹⁵ Secondly in African ontology there is what is called interconnectedness of being; a state where one is incomplete without the other. For Bujo, Africans are convinced that all things in the cosmos are interconnected. All natural force depend on each other, so that human being can live in harmony only and with the whole of nature.¹⁶ Murove, who has published on Shona people of Zimbabwe and in Ubuntu speaks of the Interdependence of individuals within the larger society to which they belong and to the environment on which they all depend. he describes an ethical outlook that suggests that human wellbeing is

indispensible from our dependence on and interdependence with all that exists and particularly with the immediate environment on which all humanity depends.

For Tangwa, a highly regarded philosopher born in Cameroon, the pre-colonial traditional African metaphysical outlook implies recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful co-existence between earth plants animals and human.

For Bujo (1998) also, the African understanding of nature... regards the human person as microcosm within with macrocosm, this microcosm, now has the task of showing respect for creation and liberating it from slavery and corruptibility. Kelbessa who has published on *African indigenous thought and practice with regards to the environment*, writes of the moral code of the common people of Ethiopia that it does not allow irresponsibility and unlimited exploitation of resources and human being. It reflects deep respect and balance between various things. The Oromo for him do not simply consider justice, integrity and respect for human being alone but they extend them to non-human species and mother earth.

From various African scholars the interdependence and the interconnectedness of being loom large as a reply to anthropocentric accusation. If anthropocentrism means a human – centered approach to the environment where every care for the environment is chiefly for human benefit then these scholars; Bujo, Kelbasa, Tangwa, etc are objecting to anthropocentric placement of Africa. For them African ontology is holistic, it is interconnected and interpenetrates. The human being is part of the whole and so also is the natural world, none is more than the other as they all form a whole. This is often referred to as a

holistic approach. Holism is the view that moral status considerably is given or should be given not just to human (anthropocentrism) or to living things (biocentrism) but to all nature in general; to the river maintain, plants and rocks etc. This is similar to the concept of ecology or ecocentric view of environment.

The place of ‘humans’ in African environmental ethics

Ubuntu is also a strong reply to the critics of African environmental ethics, its chief aim is to state the interconnectedness of being in Africa. Let us look at its proponents especially from an environmental perspective.

According to Ramose in *Ecology through Ubuntu*, Ubuntu mean that to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and on that basis, establish Botho which means a humane and respectful and polite attitude towards other human beings. Neither the individual nor the community can define and pursue their respective purpose without recognizing their mutual foundedness, their complementary natures. Wholeness is the regulative principle here since what is asserted is that the single individual is incomplete without the other.²¹

Ramose differentiated between the concept of humanity and humanness for him;

The concept of Botho or Ubuntu is not as it is referred to in this book in indigenous African language is not readily translatable into humanism... Humanness is a better rendition of the concept. humanness suggest both a condition of being and the

state of becoming of openness or ceaseless unfolding, it is opposite to any “ism” including humanism for this trend suggests a condition of finality a closeness or a kind of absolute either incapable of or resistant to any further movement.

Ramose claims that this difference between humanness and humanity speaks to two different perspectives of reality or being. Humanness regards being, or the universe as a complex wholeness involving the multi-layered and incessant interaction of all entities. This condition of permanent multi-directional movement of entities is not by definition chaos; on the contrary it is both the source and the manifestation of the intrinsic order of the universe. Hence lies the ecosophical dimension of the indigenous African concept of Ubuntu. This therefore implies that African environmental ethics with Ubuntu in perspective, is a holistic one. The principle of wholeness applies to the relation between human beings and physical or objective nature. To care for one another therefore implies caring for physical nature as well. Without such care the interdependence between human being and physical nature would be undermined.

The factor of human being is evident in Ramose’s concept of Ubuntu Botho. It is at least from humanness that the care for the environment emanated from. To be a complete human therefore is to live in a complete ecosystem and to live in a good ecosystem requires a conscious care for the environment. It is a holistic approach to the environment. Can the concept of Ubuntu be said to be completely not anthropocentric? If not completely anthropocentric does it have humans in focus? Also should we

say that it is completely holistic? If holism means caring for the entire ecosystem, why then does the care have to begin from man extending her humanness to nature and not vice versa? It seems to me, that two factors play a strong role in Ubuntu concept; the human being and the interrelatedness of being two principles that forms strong bedrock of African environmental ethic.

Metz in his relational ethics of the Sub-Saharan Africa tried to evolve an ethic that the writer describes as African somewhat. In Thaddeus Metz's "*An African theory of moral status: A Relational Alternative to individualism and Holism*" asserts that a relational theory implies that a being warrants moral considerability only if, and because it exhibits some kind of intentional or causal property with regards to another being and he went further to state that the most promising kind of relationalism is one according to which something has moral status in so far as it has a certain relation to human being in particular. This theory according to Metz is grounded on the African traditions of chain of being, relationality and communalism.

In the chain of being, final value which grounds morality comes in degrees with God at the apex ancestors, humans, animals, plants and inanimate matter in descending order.

The Relational Theory states that moral behavior is ultimately, or at least centrally, a matter of creating, sustaining and enriching relationship. While communalism states that the relevant relationship to honor are those that are communal or harmonious roughly, those that involve or that bring the agent and others closer together in some way. Thus for Metz, a being has a greater moral status the more it is capable of relating comely with characteristic human beings. Also enjoying sense of togetherness

with others, participating on a co-operate basis aiding others and doing so consequent to empathy, sympathy and the judgment others merit and for their own sake. This therefore implies that beings that can be subject of relationship, that can commune with others, and that can be objects that can be communed with by others, have a greater moral status than beings that can merely be objects of communion. Secondly, there are differential degrees which being can be objects of communion and only that difference grounds differential degrees of moral status. It therefore implies that certain animals are more able to be communed with by characteristic human beings than others e.g. cats versus fish meaning the former have a greater moral status. In addition, marginal cases of human beings are more able to be communed with by characteristic human beings than animals meaning the former have a greater moral status.

Metz's however has been criticized by Horsthemske in his work *Animal and African ethics*. For Horsthemske, Ubuntu which is captured in the position that A person is a person through other persons in focusing exclusively on human being, Ubuntu is by definition anthropocentric.²⁴ Horsthemske also criticized Metz's human consciousness for him relationality implies that when the urgent interest of animals and human person conflict, the later morally should win out and for him this is anthropocentric and also spiciest. It seems true to say that because humans are mentioned it therefore implies anthropocentrism but this is not the case if anthropocentrism is understood in the usual sense of viewing all non-human being as lacking a moral status and having a merely instrumental value for human benefit. Also the Ubuntu Maxim can be essential to an Ubuntu ethic without being exhaustive of it Adherents to such an ethic would

characteristically say that someone lacked Ubuntu if he tortured animal for fun or fail a tree for falling sake.

From the discourse one comes to terms with a perspective of African environmental ethics which begins from human being but not exhaustive of it. Humans play major part but not the final arbiter of morality. There is a relational perspective, the Ubuntu perspective which even though begins with the human being but only sees the human as a part of a holistic relationship. In some sense, one can argue that anthropocentrism cannot fully capture the African perspective of environment as it is not just about the benefit of man, thus we can say ‘anthropos’ is African but not anthropocentrism. Let us look at same anthropocentrism from another perspective.

Anthropocentrism from a historical and obligatory perspective

Eckersley asserted that anthropocentrism blossomed with the mechanistic and materialistic world view of the enlightenment period. In essence, historically, there was a period when human kind needed to exploit and understand or dominate and control nature for their survival; a time when humans needed to cause deforestation in order to build cities and nations. Time when humans needed not to venerate or worship and fear nature but exploit it. At this time, anthropocentrism prevailed. In that light the criticisms against the bible injunction ‘dominate and subdue the earth’ Gen 1:28 by scholars, seems unwarranted as the injunction was timely as it propelled humankind into inventions and scientific discoveries that has helped the life of men.

The planet at the point is compatible to a young baby who needs every food egg beef to grow. Thus it is the spirit of

domination that introduced science and technological advancement and so anthropocentrism had a historical placement. The world may not have advanced beyond here if it were asked to respect the intrinsic worth of the earth. Will it then be balanced logically to say to developing nations or underdeveloped nations as the case may be to restrain and respect the intrinsic worth of cows goats or of rock forest or wilderness where they lack meat for food where rocks block their connectivity to other towns and cities where forests and wilderness are as a result of inability to build shelter over their heads. These are puzzling philosophical questions that require answers. It is understandable to say to developed nations to restrain and respect the intrinsic worth of nature in a bit to limit their exploitative tendencies much like the old man who needs not to eat all kinds of food if he must be alive, compared to a young lad who needs as much food as she can get to enable her grow.

A switch from rights based-ethic to action based-ethic

For Onuora ethical reasoning of all sorts is anthropocentric. In that it is addressed to agents but anthropocentric starting point varies in preference they accord the human species.

There are ample reasons for act-oriented ethical reasoning to take obligations rather than rights as basic. A switch of perspective from recipient to action, from right to obligation, this carries no theoretical costs and may yield considerable gain. A focus on obligation will incorporate everything that can be covered by a focus on right (since any genuine right must be matched by a converse obligation) and can incorporate any other less tightly specified obligation, which lack counterpart rights.

Moreover the switch from right to obligation is productive for environmental ethics and for clarifying the differences of anthropocentrism and speciesism. The main advantage of taking obligations as basic is a simple gain in clarity about anthropocentrism. Even if some rights are not human right all obligation will be human obligations. Or putting the matter more carefully, obligation can be held and discharged only where capacities for action and reasoning reach a certain degree of complexity and we have no knowledge of such capacity except among human beings. Even among human beings, these capacities are not universal. So in thinking about obligations, anthropocentrism about the locus of obligations is indispensable rather than inappropriate. Without it obligations are not taken seriously since we cannot take right seriously unless we take obligation seriously. Anthropocentrism about obligation will be needed if we are to think seriously about any right including animal rights. This anthropocentrism about the locus of obligations accepts that all of obligations bearers are humans more or less.

Evaluation and conclusion

Anthropos; the human, is a strong factor in African Environmental discourse but not all there is to it when we look at the hierarchy of beings in African ontology. Human concerns cannot exhaust or summarize African environmental attitude. The likely solution is to sing ecocentrism and hammer it down the throat of African ontology whether it is African or not. Many scholars have tried to evolve an African environmental ethics which is not completely African in the bid to appeal to some popular views. This to me is an escapist route and evolving an

ethics that is not African enough cannot completely motivate Africans into taking full responsibility for their environment and secondly the ‘African’ in the view becomes questionable. African environmental ethics should be African enough without compromise, it should bring to fore its own unique contribution without necessarily changing or reinterpreting its ontology.

For Hagrove, a Professor at the University of North Texas and also an environmental philosopher, for an environmental ethics to be effective in a particular society, it must be based firmly on the cultural attitude and values that have historically evolved in that society, In borrowing from perspectives from other parts of the world, educators must be careful not to use elements that conflict with their own societal norms.

The watch words here are action based theories; by this I mean theories not for theory sake but ones that are designed to spur Africans as well as the world into action. By this I mean theories that are truly African without compromising African values. The African values human life as well as the life of nature. It’s a holistic culture. This culture has been there in their proverbs. We are living in an interconnected world, we need each other to survive, and we care for both man and nature for the sake of God, Man and nature also. To what extent then can “**obligatory anthropoholism**” capture the African attitude to their environment?

Obligatory anthropoholism simply imbibes the two core values of African ontology, the privileged man in the ecosystem and the interconnectedness of being in the world-holism. It simply posits that the humans are truly a privileged part of the ecosystem and the privilege stems from her obligatory role and [not right based. Humans are laden with the role of tending,

caring and preserving the holistic ecosystem. This capacity to care and tend for the aim of balancing the ecosystem, for the intrinsic worth of all species distinguishes her. This is a promising non anthropocentric perspective to African environmental ethics.

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Ifeakor is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State.